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## THE REALITY OF DESTITUTION IS THE DESTITUTION OF REALITY: NOTES FOR A GENEALOGY OF DESTITUENT POWER

PHILOFICTION BLANCHOT, DERIVATIVE COMMUNISM, DESTITUENT POWER, INVISIBLE COMMITTEE, REVOLUTION

**[ What follows is a draft of a longer essay yet to be written on the genealogy of destituent power covering Bataille, Blanchot, and Tronti, as well as Agamben and the Invisible Committee ]**

*During the 1970s, in Europe, a disenchanted but not hopeless generation came to the fore to lay claim to the political not as an autonomous and totalitarian sphere, but as an ethical community of singularities; history not as linear continuity, but a history whose realization has been deferred too long; not work as economically finalized toward the production of commodities, but an inoperativity deprived of end [priva di scopi] and yet not unproductive. (Giorgio Agamben)*

*Communism is the real movement that destitutes the existing state of things. (Invisible Committee)*

What becomes of communism if it is said to be "the real movement that *destitutes* the existing state of things?" Does the substitution of "destitution" for "abolition" signal a principled divergence from the vision of communism found in those pages of the *German Ideology* and as intended by Marx and Engels? Or does this destituent movement mark a progressive refinement in light of the failures of historical communism and its various workers movements? As the above epigraphs already suggest, any beginnings of an answer to such questions can be found in the works of Giorgio Agamben and the Invisible Committee; both of whom have perhaps gone farthest in reconceiving communism via the category of destituent power (or destituent gestures). With respect to Agamben, and as Jason E. Smith has already noted, when one reads Agamben's more recent political writings alongside his 1993 text, 'Form-of-Life,' what becomes clear is that through his reworking of the set of ideas that came out of the workerist tradition, he is led to view society/social relations as asymmetric and antagonistic to the community that is the content of a form-of-life:

*The workerist and post-workerist traditions understand the concept of antagonism in terms of the dynamic of capitalist social relations. This conflictual and asymmetric relation between living and dead labour is one in which living labour is always 'primary,' whose resistance to that form of capture drives capitalist development itself..Agamben's rewriting of this scenario situates the antagonism less within the dynamics of capitalist production than within the relation between 'massive inscription of social knowledge in productive processes', on the one hand, and 'intellectuality as antagonist potentiality and form-of-life' on*

*the other. Communist is the enemy of the social, that is, the objective or factual partitioning of society into classes. To the divisions of society Agamben opposes the multitude of community. The overcoming of capitalist society assumes the name not of socialism but of community: communism. (Smith, 'Form-of-Life and Antagonism,' 203)*

It is for this reason, then, that Agamben goes onto reformulate the anti-work thesis of *operaismo* and *autonomia* as follows: "If the fundamental ontological question today is not work but inoperativity...then the corresponding concept can no longer be that of 'constituent power' [*potere costituente*] but something that could be called 'destituent power' [*potenza destituente*]" ('What is destituent power?' 70). Now, with respect to the Invisible Committee, what must be said at the outset is that their reconceptualization of communism as the real movement of destituent power may appear especially deceptive to some and thus leading to fundamental misunderstandings; for what could such an invocation of destituent power mean other than their tacit affinity and agreement with Agamben's equation of the communal content of forms-of-life and the realization of communism as such?

As will be demonstrated in what follows, nothing could be further from the truth (for the Committee's usage of destituent power/gestures actually finds common ground with the very figure (*operaismo*) from which Agamben sought to distance himself). If the Committee privileges destituent, as opposed to constituent, power it is not due to destituent acts being the very means of arriving at the pure potentiality at the heart of forms-of-life (the 'antagonistic potentiality of forms-of-life'). Rather, communism as the real movement that destitutes the existing state of things since to destitute the present means (i) affirming the rupture with the current state of affairs in order to (ii) organize it and make it ever more real to the point that the crises and social problems that Capital has long since covered over become the open and public secret of social life that must be directly confronted precisely because it can no longer be avoided. And unlike Agamben's left-Heideggerian revision to the workerist and *autonomia* movements, it is with thinkers such as Guattari, or even with Marx and Engels themselves, that we discover that which infects the Committee's own theorization of communism as destituent process.

### **Humanity's Innocence: From Proletarian Existence to Prelapsarian Life**

In the Summer and Fall of 2013, Giorgio Agamben delivered a series of lectures in central France and Athens under the heading, 'What is destituent power?' Now, despite the particularities to which Agamben was responding to in each lecture – the recent occupations and insurrections in Cairo, Istanbul, London, and New York (France); the necessity to think the end of democracy in the place of its birth (Athens) – what is consistent throughout is that, for Agamben, destituent power functions as a third term that is said to overcome the static opposition between constituent and constituted power (the former being counter-hegemonic practices and the latter being acts that defend or uphold the existing institutions of the state). And it is these series of lectures that mark a key development in Agamben's overall thinking since destituent power appears as the means of realizing one of the central idea of his work as a whole: inoperativity, which is what Agamben discovers time and again, and regardless of the object of his analysis being that of theology, politics, or aesthetic and art practices. Whether it is with respect to St. Augustine's reflections on the salvation of humanity where human nature is conceived as "blessed inactivity, which is neither doing nor not doing," or Walter Benjamin who relates destituent power to Sorel's proletarian general strike in his essay *Critique of Violence*; or regarding the relationship between poetry, communication, and language as such ("What is a poem...if not an operation taking place in language that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use?"); what is fundamentally at stake is how to conceive the reality of a form-of-life whose actions, when viewed from the vantage point of the existing order of things, cannot be understood as anything other than blessed/idle in essence, non-productive of value, and impractical for deliberation. However, the salient point here is that, for Agamben, these characteristics of idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity, are not understood to be products of history. Idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity are *ontological* facts of human existence; so much so that Agamben will go on to claim that it is precisely these attributes proper to the being of humanity that capital appropriates and exploits:

*Human life is idle and aimless, but it is precisely this lack of action and aim which makes possible the incomparable busyness of the human race. And the machinery of government functions because it has captured within its empty heart the inactivity of the human essence. This inactivity is the political substance of the West, the glorious nourishment of all power. This is why feasting and idleness resurface continually in the dreams and political utopias of the West...They are the enigmatic relics which the economic-theological machine abandons on the shoreline of civilization; mankind returns to them wonderingly, but always uselessly and nostalgically. Nostalgically because they seem to contain something that clings jealously to the human essence; uselessly because in reality they are nothing more than the ashes of the immaterial, glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine during its inexorable, relentless rotation. (Agamben, 'Art, Inactivity, Politics,' 138.)*

For Agamben, it is to humanity's originary idleness/inoperativity that one must center in any engagement with the questions posed by politics. In other words, it is only by attending to what is allegedly ontological regarding humanity (originary inoperativity) that we can adequately determine how best to overcome the political fact of our alienation as imposed by history. Hence, says Agamben, the shape of the politics to come is not that of a struggle over the State or between counter-hegemonies and hegemonic forms. To the contrary, "the coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between the state and the nonstate (*humanity*), that is, an irresolvable disjunction between whatever singularities and the state organization" (*Means Without End*, 88). Given such an analysis, one is led to the logical conclusion that the politics to come will be defined, not by its struggle with and over the State,

but by the struggle between "humanity" (as the nonstate) and the State as various social forms of sovereign/governmental power, which pervert what we have always, originally, been in truth: inoperative, idle, and therefore free.

However, confronted with a conclusion as bold as this (i.e. the coming politics begins by positing an originary idleness against history as a series of state-sponsored perversions of this essence) a few questions necessarily arise: *Insofar as inoperativity and destituent power is said to be the essence of the being of humanity, does this not lead to an understanding of communist politics as a struggle between the ontological, on the one hand, and the historical and material, on the other? And to what extent does the notion of destituent power refer to what are allegedly the echoes of an ontological essence from which we have become estranged under capital?* In any event, the crucial point to be emphasized is that what is operative behind such strong claims regarding the substance of humanity, is an equivocation between two conceptions of time: the time of eschatology and that of history. For it is this equivocation of eschatological and historical time that grounds Agamben's understanding of inoperativity and destituent power as what is most essential to human being. And to make matters worse, one equivocation inevitably leads to another, but this time with respect to political analysis. For insofar as inoperativity/destituent power is said to be the originary substance of (human) being, the proletariat as the classical figure of revolutionary politics struggle is now nothing but a means of returning to our once innocent, unspoiled, prelapsarian life. In other words, for Agamben, politics is the price paid by humanity's original sin of state-craft and the various, historical, forms of sovereign power, and each time realized as through a *dispositif* as its particular modes of capture: "The originary place of Western politics consists of an *ex-ceptio*, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Consider the peculiarities of this operation: life is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded, and, at the same time, included by way of its exclusion. Life—that is, the *Impolitical* (*l'Impolitico*)—must be politicized through a complex operation that has the structure of an exception. The autonomy of the political is founded, in this sense, on a division, an articulation, and an exception of life. From the outset, Western politics is biopolitical" ("What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?" 65). That said, one may still wonder if we have been unfair with such a characterization of Agamben, for in his 2013 lectures Agamben goes on to provide further clarification to the way in which destituent power can be said to be the shape of politics to come; a politics made possible by virtue of

*...living a life that a form-of-life can constitute itself as the inoperativity immanent in every life. The constitution of a form-of-life coincides...completely with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. The form-of-life is...the revocation of all factual vocations...It is not a question of thinking a better or more authentic form of life...Inoperativity is not another work...it coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, with a life. And this destitution is the coming politics. ("What is a destituent power?" 65)*

A passage such as this merits our interest for at least two reasons. On the one hand, destituent power is now said to be something innately bound to, yet distinct from, humanity's originary inoperativity. And while it remains the case that it is by destituent means that we are returned to our non-alienated inoperative living, Agamben qualifies this previous iteration with the inclusion of *forms-of-life* as that previously missing mediator capable of overcoming the dilemma of capital's historical separation of humanity ontologically considered and alienated being, which takes the form of *bare life*. Now, says Agamben, destituent power is accessible only through this experience of living a life inseparable from its (communal) form: "the destitution of power and of its works is an arduous task, because it is first of all and only in a form-of-life that it can be carried out. Only a form-of-life is constitutively destituent" (Ibid, 72). That is to say, it only by means of a collectivity that it becomes possible for individuals to "return it [the human activity that is the substance of value production] to the potentiality from which it originates" (Ibid, 73). And on this account it would appear that destituent power is no longer simply the immediate recuperation of alienated human being and rather an always latent possibility of non-alienated living perpetually deferred and rendered increasingly impossible. Thus, and put it a more direct relation to the prior ontological formulations

*Contemplation and inoperativity are...the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task, renders it open for that particular absence of work that we are accustomed to calling 'politics' and 'art.' Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply 'works': they name...the dimension in which the linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are made inoperative and contemplated as such. (Ibid, 74)*

Significant in this account of destituent power is the fact that Agamben now appears capable of addressing the issue of how originary being and our future inoperativity can be said to have any relation (insofar as it is the history of sovereign governmentality that has successfully functioned as that which perpetually obstructs our non-alienated living). That said, what is gained in logical consistency is simultaneously lost in terms of its concrete specificity. For while Agamben conceives of the destitution of capital as the process of transforming an overdetermined set of possible forms-of-life into an underdetermined set of possible forms, the potentiality that is (re)discovered through destituent processes cannot be attributed to human being alone; and whether considered ontologically, or historically and materially. Thus we are led to wonder, is a non-ontological conception of destituent power possible?

### ***Destituons le Monde: Against the Management of Everyday Life***

According to the Invisible Committee, destituent acts or gestures are realized according to the fusion of the positive/creative logic of founding the conditions for an *other* world in which many worlds fit and the negative/destructive logic of ending, once

and for all, the present world fashioned in the image and likeness of Capital. That is, destituent gestures abide by a logic where 'the One divides into Two' ("The destituent gesture is thus desertion and attack, creation and wrecking, and all at once, *in the same gesture*"). That is, destituent gestures create and destroy in one and the same act. Moreover, these collective gestures belong to that class of acts, which rely upon the temporality proper to social reproduction and are actualized in times of decision, which is to say, in times of crisis. And what is ultimately realized along the way; in the bringing about an end to *this* world; is an altogether different solution to the two fold problem of the *estrangement of bodies* and *fragmentation of worlds*. However, destituent power is said to resolve the issue of separated bodies and of the discontinuity that structures the possible worlds of every form-of-life *not* by rehabilitating some sense of 'unity,' conceived as the coming-into-being of a still underdetermined (though latently possible) counter-hegemony of the Left. To the contrary, destituent acts resolve the crisis of estrangement and fragmentation through the construction of a different organization of the ongoing fragmentation of forms-of-life and their worlds. "Here is the paradox, then: being constrained to unity undoes us, the lie of social life makes us psychotic, and embracing fragmentation is what allows us to regain a serene presence to the world. There is a certain mental position where this fact ceases to be perceived in a contradictory way. That is where we place ourselves" (Now, 46).

What, then, is intended in this redefinition of "the real movement" as a process that abides by a destituent (as opposed to an abolitionist) logic? According to the terms that determine a properly destituent political logic, the virtue of any struggle against the state and capital is to be found in the potential harbor within each action that suggests a future that has finally done away with everything that encourages us to "hate Monday's" when it is capital that is the cause behind the *whatever-object* of our lamentations. That is to say, actualizing destituent power is to give material reality to the potential of establishing the distance between movements and established institutions, in order for the former to better desert, or flee, or take flight from, everything that is involved rendering vacuous the relation we maintain to ourselves, to those we call comrade, friend, or lover, and to the world insofar as it is made in the image and likeness of capital. That is to say, and as a fellow accomplice recently pointed out with respect to the situation of the *gilets jaunes* movement in France: "It is not the radicals who are making the movement, it is the movement that is radicalizing people." So, unlike those collectivities which tend toward "constituent" or "constituted" power and situate their strategy within the dialectical relation of recognition/negotiation with the ruling authority (in the hopes of taking possession of the state), collectivities that abide by a destituent logic adhere to, and seek to actualize, the vital need to *disengage* and distance itself from the dialectical trap of constituent-constituted power. But what would this alleged other form of unity mean, when conceived as a collective 'abandonment' of the economy and 'disengagement' from the dialectic between constituent and constituent power? At the very least, says the Committee, it would mean the reformulation of the communist question itself; for the equivocation that began with Lenin regarding the terms "socialism" and "communism" has given rise to a more profound confusion whereby liberal economists, socialists, and Marxists all have agreed that the question with which we are confronted is nothing but "a question of management" (Ibid, 138).

To destitute or 'abandon' the economy, then, not only means acknowledging the illusory gains of constituent power *in theory*. To abandon the economy implies an organization of collective struggle founded upon the fact that "capitalism is not a mode of *management* but a mode of *production* based on specific *productive relations*, and revolution targets these relations" (*Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, 107). Thus the need for an other mode of organization and struggle other than that of constituent power (a form of struggle, which poses the problem of the abolition of the present state of things as being a question of management); and precisely since:

*Communism is not a "superior economic organization of society" but the destitution of the economy. Economy rests on a pair of fictions, therefore, that of society and that of the individual. Destituting it involves situating this false antinomy and bringing to light that which it means to cover up. (Now, 137)*

Thus, it can be said that destituent are those acts which are grounded upon a rejection of developing better and more equitable strategies of economic management insofar as communism is not a "superior economic organization." So, insofar as this notion of destituent power seeks to cause the problems and crises capital "means to cover up" to appear in every day social reality, destituent gestures necessarily involve a certain level of organization of struggle in order to achieve the "bringing to light" of the problems and crises that affect the whole of society. What is more, it is precisely through the Committee's understanding of destituent power as organizing struggles such that they are able to (i) resolve the problems of social reproduction through decidedly anti-capitalist (i.e. communist) measures while (ii) rendering social problems unavoidable and impossible to ignore mean, that we are returned to what Marx and Engels originally understood regarding that most general phase of the development of the proletariat:

*In the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where the war breaks out into open revolution, and where violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat. (Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto)*

Thus, we arrive at the central difference between Agamben's and the Invisible Committee's understandings of destituent power: while Agamben consistently conceives of destituent power as the capacity for forms-of-life to redeem the Humanity from which it has been ontologically estranged vis-a-vis Capital, the Committee, by contrast, understand destituent power as the general phase of proletarian development centered around anti-state, anti-bureaucratic, and communist *social relations*. And it is due to this discrepancy between destitution as messianic capacity of forms-of-life and destitution as the form and organization struggle

takes when founded upon communist social relations that it comes as no surprise to read the Committee issue a decidedly anti-Agambenian statement as the following:

*Only by means of this type of confusion did it become possible to imagine that a subject like "Humanity" could exist. Humanity – that is, all human beings, stripped of what weaves together their concrete situated existence, and gathered up phantasmally into one great something-or-other, nowhere to be found. By wiping out all the attachments that make up the specific texture of worlds, on the pretext of abolishing private ownership of the means of production, modern "communism" has effectively made a tabula rasa of everything. That's what happens to those who practice economy, even by criticizing it. (Now, 136–37)*

For the Committee, then, such appeals are possible only insofar as one assumes that the lives of individuals are adequately defined in isolation for the attributes it comes to assume in the course of living; that is, insofar as one follows Agamben in confusing what is ontologically possible with what is actually an historical and material potentiality. At stake, then, in this debate regarding destituent power is the material possibility of directly appropriating the forces and relations of capitalist production. Moreover, and in contrast to Agamben's understanding of destitution in relation to law upholding (constituted power) and law establishing violence (constituent power), the Committee conceives of destituent power as being 'against the economy' insofar as the question isn't that of appropriating the means of production and rather poses the question of how to go about constructing the relations of social reproduction measured by something other than labour-time (or what is required for production). That is to say, for the Committee, what becomes evident is that given the present organization of global society vis-a-vis Capital, any politics geared toward the reappropriation of the forces of production will continue to fall short of abolishing the *relations of production* that organize and form daily life:

*As we know-Trotsky pointed it out long ago in The Revolution Betrayed-the Russians have always imported their technology from the west; but since Khrushchev's day, they have also taken their economic models from there too [...] Obviously it will not be by importing models of desire...that the Soviet bureaucrats will escape the fundamental impasse they have got themselves into, with their endless Five-Year Plans of which absolutely everyone is sick to death. Not merely are they starting no institutionalizing process by importing prefabricated car factories, but by the same token they are transplanting forms of human relationship[s] quite foreign to socialism, a hierarchization of technological functions proper to a society based on individual profits, a split between research and industry, between intellectual and manual work, an alienating style of mass consumption and so on...Not only are car factories imported, then, but also social neuroses and in hyperactive form. (Guattari, 'Causality, Subjectivity and History')*

Destituent power, then, is a mode of collective struggle that prioritizes transforming the way in which individuals relate to the production process such that the distinction between labour-time and leisure-time is no longer that which structures and organizes everyday life. And it is for this reason that the Committee will claim the following:

*The traditional revolutionary program involved a reclaiming of the world, an expropriation of the expropriators, a violent appropriation of that which is ours, but which we have been deprived of. But here's the problem: capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence...It has configured, equipped, and made desirable the ways of speaking, thinking, eating, working and vacationing, of obeying and rebelling, that suit its purpose. In doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate. Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon's warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, Dassault, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and their poisonous merchandise?...What complicates the task for revolutionaries is that the old constituent gesture no longer works there either. With the result that the most desperate, the most determined to save it, have finally found the winning formula: in order to have done with capitalism, all we have to do is reappropriate money itself! (Now, 85)*

To seek out the organization requirements for reproducing "what is lived in the fight itself" (ibid, 80); for reproducing "that experience of fraternity in combat, of friendship" (ibid, 133); for the reproduction of the fleeting experiences of a form of non-alienated living one encounters in the midst of struggle; all of these are so many iterations of the fundamental principle that what is revolutionary in moments of insurrection is the fact that individuals became accustomed to, comfortable with, and desiring of that form-of-life that no longer structures our existence according to the time of labour and the time of "leisure." As one of the many participants in the 2013 Gezi Park protests remarked, perfectly capturing such a sentiment, "[T]he people who are coming here, for the past 18 days, are not spending money. And when they get used to not spending money, it's like a revolution within themselves." For the Committee, then, destituent power takes aim at capitalist social relations by giving a form and organization to struggle that are not only sustain friendship as "fraternity in combat," but that produce the necessary conditions for what comes after the barricades and the insurrectionary fervor, which inevitably subside. To destitute the economy, then, is but the collective construction of what is necessary for the actualization and generalization of our non-alienated living; or what the Committee simply call "community:" *Without at least the occasional experience of community, we die inside, we dry out, become cynical, harsh, desert-life. Life becomes that ghost city peopled by smiling mannequins, which functions. Our need for community is so pressing that after having ravaged all the existing bonds, capitalism is running on nothing but the promise of "community." What are the social networks, the dating apps, if not that promise perpetually disappointed? What are all the modes, all the technologies of communication, all the love songs, if not a way to maintain the dream of a continuity between beings where in*

*the end every contact melts away? [...] In 2015, a single website of pornographic videos called PornHub was visited for 4,392,486,580 hours, which amounts to two and half times the hours spent on Earth by Homo sapiens. Even this epoch's obsession with sexuality and its hyper-indulgence in pornography attests to the need for community, in the very extremeness of the latter's deprivation (Now, 133).*

taken from <https://thetragiccommunity.wordpress.com/here>

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META

- CONTACT
- FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX
- IMPRESSUM
- DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

- CATEGORIES
- TAGS
- AUTHORS
- ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

- FACEBOOK
- INSTAGRAM
- TWITTER